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THE CATHOLIC CAREER OF ALFRED LOISY

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It takes perhaps some boldness of assertion to maintain that the life-story of an author relatively unknown—at least to the English-reading world—deserves to rank with those acknowledged masterpieces of religious autobiography, the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* of John Henry Newman, and the *Souvenirs d'Enfance et de Jeunesse* of Ernest Renan. Renan and Newman were born leaders of men, each drawing after himself a train of zealous disciples, and followed by an admiring public. Both were consummate artists in words, knowing full well how to make the most of the dramatic and human element that chance or their own choice had woven into their careers. Each produced a long row of eloquent volumes, and their writings not only enjoyed the widest vogue in their own day but are among the works of the nineteenth century whose significance is still far from being exhausted. Each was a convert—the one into Roman Catholicism, the other out of it—and so their self-revelations appeal to the psychological interest of such a process, when the subject of it is a man of genius, and no less to the historical interest attaching to any conspicuous individual whose career has become interwoven with the Church of Rome. The *Choses Passées*¹ of Professor Alfred Loisy assuredly did not originate in any conscious imitation of these two famous writers, although both were conspicuous among

¹ *Choses Passées*, Paris, Émile Nourry, 1913.

his formative influences.² But his book belongs in the same class with theirs, and in its distinction of style, its dramatic and human appeal, and its psychological and historical interest, as I shall try in this article to show, falls no whit behind. It is my confident belief, at least, that *Choses Passées* bids fair to become in its turn a classic to be placed beside the *Apologia* and the *Souvenirs* on the shelf of the student of religion, as a document of outstanding significance for the intellectual and religious evolution of the last quarter-century.

Since 1908, M. Loisy has occupied the chair of the history of religions in the *Collège de France*, made vacant by the death of the lamented Jean Réville. In March of that year, on the ground of his obstinate persistence in "modernist" opinions, Loisy was visited with excommunication in its extreme form by the authorities of the Roman Church, in whose unstinted service he had thus far spent his life. The most competent critic of the Bible and of Christian origins yet produced by that Church in any land, he has been as prolific an author as either Renan or Newman. With already twenty volumes to his credit—three of them monumental achievements of exegetical science running close to a thousand pages each—he is still at sixty in full career, except in so far as the war has necessarily interfered with his productiveness. His bi-monthly *Revue d'Histoire et de Littérature religieuses* has not been issued, for reasons that one can easily conjecture, since the fatal August of 1914. The first overwhelming wave of German invasion reached almost to his summer home at Ceffonds, near Montier-en-Der, Haute Marne, and the present line of trenches runs not many miles away. The past,

² "... Pendant mes études de critique biblique, en 1881-1893, . . . mon auteur de prédilection fut Renan, que je ne prenais d'ailleurs pour un oracle; mais c'est surtout avec lui et contre lui que je pensais; de 1894 à 1900, c'est avec Newman, passablement élargi, que je pense contre les théologiens protestants." *Revue d'Histoire et de Littérature religieuses*, Nov.-Dec. 1913, p. 570.

however, is secure. Neglecting, therefore, his recent work in the general history of religions and in the pagan and Christian mysteries, which presages important results to come, we turn—following his own account of the things that are behind—to his career up to the age of fifty-one in the Roman Catholic Church.

I

Alfred Firmin Loisy was born at Ambrières, in the upper reaches of the Marne valley, on February 28, 1857, of peasant stock which had been on the land and had swarmed into several of the neighboring hamlets for something like two hundred years. Too frail of body to become a tiller of the soil, from an early age he gave evidence of a rare intellectual endowment. When taken to school at the age of four and a half, the timid and sickly child sat for two days mute before the teacher who was trying to instruct him in the alphabet; on the third day, without being asked, he recited all the letters, not wishing, as he says, to pronounce the names of those strange signs until he knew them perfectly. The incident is typical of his whole later career,—of his marvelous capacity for assimilating languages, ancient and modern, and provinces of learning, one after another; and equally of his sturdy independence and self-respecting pride. In it all, the child was father of the man. His appropriation of Catholic scholasticism and the traditional dogma was so complete as to leave nothing to be desired. But his conclusions, when finally announced, came straight from his own intelligence and conscience. Authority never awed him. A friendly superior, unable to persuade him into the usual smooth and politic ways, characterized his spirit in later years as “perpendicular.”³ If it

³ *Choses Passées*, p. 137. Suppleness of character, he tells us, never was the dominant trait of his ancestors. *Ibid.* p. 2.

was not always strictly so, as we shall have occasion to see, the cause may be looked for in the peculiar training he received, and in the deep love he continued to cherish for the Church of his baptism until she rejected him with anathemas.

The Catholic Church hardly has herself to blame for having furnished the future heresiarch with the weapons that he was gradually to turn against her system of dogma. The young Loisy received the usual education, wholly in Church schools, of a French boy destined for the priesthood. From the hands of the village curé he passed to the ecclesiastical *collège* (i.e. high school) at St. Dizier, where he formed a resolve to serve the Church in her sacred ministry. Before he had quite reached eighteen, he entered the diocesan seminary at Châlons-sur-Marne. His theological course was of a perfectly orthodox mediocrity. His description of his, generally incompetent, teachers, while not unkind, is to the full as diverting as the account of the not much more illustrious masters of the seminary at Issy-sur-Seine, in whose high-walled garden, now invaded by the roar of suburban Paris, the youthful Renan drew in such stimulating draughts of the quiet and still air of delightful studies.⁴ The two bright spots in the four years' course were, first, a year in philosophy under the Abbé Ludot, a lifelong friend who, because of modernizing tendencies, was transferred at the end of Loisy's first year to the obscurity of a village curacy, where he remained until his death in 1905; and, secondly, the acquisition of Hebrew, with help from a fellow-student at the outset, and the reading of the Hebrew Bible, in conjunction with the Septuagint, in the spare time of his last three years. In this concrete study of texts, the future critic found his *métier*, and the amassing of positive linguistic and exegetical knowledge brought a solace of mind which

⁴ *Souvenirs*, IV, ii (D. C. Heath edition, p. 161).

his prescribed courses had denied him. The effect on his growing intelligence of the empty abstractions and futile dialectics of the Thomist system of education, fastened on Catholic seminaries by the decree of Leo XIII, was desolating. Of the time given to the study of Christian doctrine, after the scholastic method, he speaks as "four years of intellectual and moral torture."⁵ Even the private research that he found time to bestow on the writings of the great Aquinas not only brought no relief, but rather deepened his doubts. Thus at twenty-one, having disregarded the sound advice of his high-school principal, to take his baccalaureate in arts before embarking on the ecclesiastical career, he left Châlons having for mental furnishing only the narrowly traditional teaching of this provincial seminary, corroded by a secret scepticism that he was wholly unable to suppress, and relieved by his independent acquisition of a knowledge of the Bible in its original tongues.

He was, naturally enough, marked by the head of the seminary, M. Roussel, for a professorship, and, with this in view, was presented to the Bishop of Châlons, M. Meignan — whom we are to meet again in an interesting connection — for appointment to the just-established (1878) Catholic Institute of Paris, to take an advanced course in theology. This is the sort of good turn that the Catholic Church is capable of doing for her more brilliant sons. In Loisy's case the outcome was unlooked-for. He had undergone a severe inner struggle as to the soundness of his Catholic faith prior to ordination to the sub-diaconate, when the obligation of celibacy had to be assumed, and after a few months of hard study in Paris his always uncertain health gave way. Repairing, after a short rest, to his old haunts at Châlons,

⁵ *Choses Passées*, p. 29. That some improvement has been made in teaching the Thomist system, may be seen by consulting *A Manual of Modern Scholastic Philosophy*, by Cardinal Mercier and Professors of the Higher Institute of Philosophy, Louvain; Eng. tr., 2 vols., London, Kegan Paul; St. Louis, B. Herder, 1916.

he was there ordained deacon and, on June 29, 1879, priest. Two years in the country, in charge of small parishes, did much to restore his strength, and in May, 1881, at his urgent request, seconded by that of his professors in Paris, he was reassigned to the Catholic Institute. So began a more significant stage in what he himself calls "my laborious Odyssey"⁶—the stage of a dozen strenuous years that was to end in a serious check to his career, and in his first tragic disappointment with human nature.

The leading spirit in the Catholic Institute was the Abbé Louis Duchesne, well-known as a historian of the early Church and in later years a member of the French Academy.⁷ To him Loisy attached himself, and he held a guiding hand over his remarkable pupil until 1889, when a serious breach occurred between them. While engaged in his brief parochial duties, Loisy had kept on with his studies to such effect that within two months after the return to Paris he was granted the baccalaureate in theology. The next fall, owing to illness of the professor of Scriptural interpretation—the diocese of Paris not being prolific in Hebrew scholars—he was made, at the age of twenty-four, instructor in Hebrew at the Catholic Institute. To extend his knowledge, he took courses in Hebrew under Renan at the *Collège de France* and in Assyriology under Arthur Amiaud—he was his only pupil—at the *École pratique des Hautes Études*. Then, as was inevitable, perspectives of which he had hitherto not dreamed began to open. Renan's informal but searching discussion of the Old Testament text made havoc of whatever was left of his early faith in Biblical infallibility and literal inspiration. The young abbé, who sat taking notes in his corner—and had progressed to the point of laughing

⁶ *Choses Passées*, p. 27.

⁷ On Duchesne, cf. A. Houtin, *Histoire du modernisme catholique*, pp. 2 f.

with the rest when a tall ecclesiastic suddenly left, slamming the door behind him, on hearing Renan say that Jeremiah might have had something to do with the composition of Deuteronomy⁸—at first secretly hoped to use the master's arguments some day to refute him. But the cloak of Elijah fell, as of old, on the shoulders of Elisha. A copy of Tischendorf's New Testament, lent him by Duchesne for a summer vacation's reading, was a revelation not only of the endless variations in the manuscripts but also of the serious inconsistencies in the narratives themselves. He saw these with a characteristically French trenchancy and incapacity for self-deception; and thenceforth belief in the Virgin Birth and in the Resurrection rested in his mind on the sandiest of foundations. Even the unsuspecting M. Vigouroux, professor of Scriptural interpretation at St. Sulpice—where nothing had been forgotten and nothing learned since Renan passed through its portals thirty-six years before—contributed his full share to the disillusionment. The cautiously apologetic tone of his lectures utterly failed to meet at least one student's keen curiosity and clear perception of the state of the evidence; while an ill-advised course in Biblical rationalism, in which he reviewed the history of critical exegesis, only made matters worse, the professor's attempted refutations of critical results merely bringing out in more glaring fashion the disaccord between the Biblical data and the propositions that Catholic theology professes to derive from them. "I must say," testifies Loisy, "that his instruction and his books did more to turn me away from orthodox opinions in this matter than all the rationalists put together, Renan included."⁹ So much for half-measures, and for conventional apologetics, when an eager and penetrating mind is in question!

⁸ *Choses Passées*, p. 66.⁹ *Ibid.* p. 58.

The inner state of the young instructor was by this time even more perplexed than when he had tried at Châlons to squeeze spiritual nutriment out of the barren logomachy of Thomas Aquinas. With the prevalent Catholic teaching he was deeply disenchanted. Formerly, his religious feeling had been intense and at times ecstatic. Now it had almost entirely lapsed. He saw clearly the flat impossibility of reconciling the position toward which he was tending with the accepted Catholic doctrine. "I had not brought to the seminary (Châlons) the shadow of an idea contrary to the teaching of the Church."¹⁰ But, he now writes in his diary, "The Church is at the present hour an obstacle to the intellectual development of humanity."¹¹ A Latin thesis prepared in 1883-84 for the doctorate in theology opened the eyes of the rector of the Catholic Institute, M. d'Hulst, to the total abandonment of the traditional dogmatics on the part of his most promising scholar. Such radical views on inspiration, in the Bible and in the Apostolic Fathers to Tertullian, Loisy was told, it would never do to print; they would only be grazing-ground for the Congregation of the Index.¹² The ideas are obvious enough, but they were not then and are not now Catholic doctrine:

"That the inspiration of the Scriptures, having to do with existing writings, subject to analysis, was a belief to be controlled by the study of the books in question; that the psychology of the inspired authors was visibly the same as that of all men who write; that whatever inspiration might add of the divine, changed not at all the nature of the writings to which it pertained, and did not transform a pseudonymous book, like *The Wisdom of Solomon*, into an authentic work of Solomon; that, if the revelation was contained in the Bible, and without error, as declared by the Vatican Council, it was under a relative form, proportioned to the time and to the environment in which the books had appeared, as well as to the general outlook of that time and environment; that the insuffi-

¹⁰ *Choses Passées*, p. 34.¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 68.¹² *Ibid.* p. 71.

ciency of the Scriptures as a rule of faith resulted from their very nature, and that the magistracy of the Church had for its object the adaptation of ancient doctrine to ever-new needs, in disengaging the essential truth from its superannuated expression; that authors like Irenaeus and Tertullian had anticipated this when they had opposed to the extravagant exegesis of the Gnostics not the letter of the Bible, interpreted by common sense, but the ecclesiastical rule of faith, imposed on the Bible as the rule for its interpretation."¹³

Implied in these conclusions — so arresting, when we consider the environment in which they were matured — is the frankly revolutionary idea of the complete relativity of all doctrinal construction, whether derived from the Bible or formulated by the Church — an idea so incompatible with any vestige of finality or authority in doctrine that comparatively few minds are yet prepared to admit it in its fullness. Loisy says that he nowhere met this idea in his reading. It was not likely that he would meet it there, though hints dropped by Renan may well have helped to form it. Rather, it came to him one night by a kind of sudden illumination. The completely rounded thought was the result of vital fermentation which had long been going on in his mind.¹⁴

The inner conflict of his Catholic career — which was to last for twenty-four years longer — consisted, on the one hand, in his heroic effort to win a standing-ground in Roman Catholic teaching for this principle of the complete relativity of ecclesiastical doctrine to the time and conditions of its origin, with the necessary corollaries of a development of doctrine through all the past, and its further progress through all the future; and, on the other hand, in the repeated and at length definitive refusal by the Pope and his advisers to abandon one jot or tittle of the rigid absolutism of the mediæval structure of dogma. To this the Roman Catholic

¹³ *Choses Passées*, pp. 72 f.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 75.

Church, since the opening of the new century, seems to have irretrievably committed itself, largely by way of explicit repudiation of Loisy's conclusions as a critic and a historian of Christianity. The encyclical *Pascendi* of Pius X, and the anti-Modernist oath by which it was followed to ensure its more complete effectiveness, have fastened this scholastic system on the Catholic Church with paralyzing results so far as concerns the normal progress of thought. This is the key to the apparently easy repulse of the Modernist movement. The victory was of that Pyrrhic kind which the Church won, with equal ease and self-delusiveness, over Galileo. The parallel occurs more than once to Loisy himself.¹⁵ The phenomena of doctrinal growth and change, throughout the Bible and the history of the Church, are undeniable. The historical method has become as axiomatic to minds trained in the modern viewpoint as the scientific reasoning based on the Copernican astronomy. It is interesting to speculate on how long the Roman organization can hold back the inevitable admission that the Thomist philosophy, in all its principal assumptions and deductions, is as dead and useless as the Ptolemaic theory of the heavens, with its cycles and epicycles.¹⁶ While this conflict emerges in sharpest outline from conditions that have developed within the Roman Catholic Church since the assertion of Infallibility in 1870, it is also present in slightly different form in the more backward sections of Protestantism, where it will long trouble the spirits of both progressives and conservatives. The profit to be drawn from a study of the Catholic career of Alfred Loisy is so great because there the issue is joined with a clarity and a completeness not elsewhere surpassed if anywhere equaled.

¹⁵ Choses Passées, pp. 109, 127.

¹⁶ Rudolf Eucken, Die Philosophie des Thomas von Aquino und die Kultur der Neuzeit, passim.

II

In the crisis of doubt which followed the rejection of his thesis on inspiration and which remained more or less acute for several years, Loisy kept unremittingly at work, carrying his studies far beyond the demands of his instructorship. He made it a duty, he tells us, to read through the whole Bible in the original tongues in the course of every year.¹⁷ Thus his ultimate mastery over it was arduously won. Beginning in 1886, he conducted a seminar in Assyriology at the Catholic Institute. His second-year instruction in Hebrew developed into a course in exegesis, to prepare for which he studied the works of Reuss and the best German commentators. Resolved as he was to avoid any closed system, and determined to know all the facts, it was not long before he had to face squarely the question whether he could continue teaching as a priest of the Roman Church, whose fundamental claim—that of the supernatural character of revelation—he now realized was untenable. His reasons for not seceding forthwith are significant.¹⁸ The most conclusive was that in the depth of his soul, notwithstanding all he had suffered, he remained profoundly attached to the spirit of Catholicism. Then, as he tried to persuade himself, his doubts were speculative rather than material. Even where they touched essential beliefs, could not these be retained in some symbolic sense, as having a value not readily to be acquired by new constructions? If the hope for an intellectual rebirth among the French clergy—which had been the official reason for the founding of the Catholic Institute—was no longer his, might

¹⁷ *Choses Passées*, p. 77.

¹⁸ “À vingt ans, je m’étais donné sans réserve à l’Église, et si sincèrement donné que, même après avoir constaté que plus d’une erreur s’était glissée dans le contrat, je n’ai pas cru devoir reprendre ma parole avant qu’on me la rendit.” Loisy, *À Propos d’Histoire des Religions*, 1911, p. 148.

he not live peaceably in the service of the Church, a modest scholar, confining himself to the minutiae of philology and avoiding the perilous paths of theology and apologetics? This seems to have been for a time his heart's desire; but circumstances and his own irrepressible candor made such a program in the end impossible.

His sympathy for his students, whom he would gladly have spared such sufferings as he himself had undergone, furnished the motive for doing what he could to bridge the yawning chasm between Catholic tradition and the modern mind. The attempt he was making, and was to persist in until the Roman authorities took stringent measures to disown him, was in line with a notion of Duchesne's, that the fields of history and of theology could be permanently held apart, without disturbing each other.¹⁹ To this essentially futile endeavor Loisy was to consecrate his remaining years in the Catholic fold. It could not succeed, because, in his professions of loyalty to the Catholic principle, he steadily meant one thing while the official Church meant another. The situation, as we have already seen and as he now admits, rested on a fatal equivocation.²⁰

In 1890 he was made assistant to M. Vigouroux in Biblical introduction, the larger part of the work falling to his share, while the title, for reasons of policy, went to the older and "safer" man. In the same year he received his doctorate, not without making a solemn public profession of faith, part of which—a promise to teach the Bible only according to the unanimous consensus of the Fathers—nearly stuck in his throat.²¹ Soon after, his first book appeared, drawn from the material of his lectures, a *History of the Old Testament Canon* (1890),

¹⁹ Houtin, op. cit. p. 3. Cf. also a keenly critical comment on Loisy's position at this transition stage, in M. Alfred Loisy's *Type of Catholicism*, by Professor Percy Gardner, *Hibbert Journal*, Oct. 1904, Vol. III, No. 1, p. 126.

²⁰ Choses Passées, p. 90. Cf. below, pp. 60 ff. ²¹ Ibid. p. 106.

followed the next year by a *History of the New Testament Canon* (1891). In these works, the dogmatic method was quietly ignored and the historical and critical definitely adopted. His general plan of campaign as an innovator was to attack the less exposed parts of his subject first, in the expectation that a gradual liberalizing of opinion would make it safe to pass on to more debatable topics. In the genial closing years of the pontificate of Leo XIII, such a hope seemed for a time not wholly vain, and was shared by many besides himself.²² But it was destined to a rude disenchantment.

From 1892, Loisy began the regular publication of his lectures in a little periodical, which had some two hundred subscribers, called *Enseignement biblique*. This soon brought him into difficulty, and eventually led to his summary expulsion from the Catholic Institute. His works on the Canon, already referred to, had awakened the first of a long series of newspaper polemics; and an article on Proverbs, denying the Solomonic authorship and assigning a post-exilic date to the collection, gave occasion for a denunciation at Rome—by his titular head, M. Vigouroux, we are led to infer. There was, on the part of the older man, a touch of professional jealousy as well as of doctrinal suspicion, which a little spice of malice in Loisy's narrative allows to show through.²³ A general taint of heresy began to attach to the young professor's fast-growing reputation. Two articles on the Babylonian myths of the creation and deluge, as related to the Genesis stories, led to his courses being forbidden to the students of St. Sulpice by the superior, M. Icard, a strict traditionalist. The same measure of protection from the infiltration of novelties had been taken some years before against certain temerities of Duchesne in the history of the early Church. The latter's prestige, however, as a member of the *Institut de France*,

²² Joseph Schnitzer, *Der katholische Modernismus*, pp. 22 ff.

²³ Choses Passées, p. 107.

and his strong backing from the laity, as well as a probable dread of his biting invective, had saved his standing in the Catholic Institute. Neither by nature nor by circumstances was Loisy so well protected. Reserved in manner, delicate in health, and so absorbed in his work as to be practically a recluse, he had in his favor when assailed only the solid scientific merit of his results — not the most potent recommendation in circles where mundane opinion and ecclesiastical policy had a determining voice over mere considerations of historical and critical accuracy.

“Some day it will be matter for astonishment — at least so I should hope,” he writes, “that a Catholic university professor was adjudged a dangerous character for having said, in the year of grace 1892, that the narratives of the first chapters of Genesis are not to be taken as literal history, and that the pretended agreement of the Bible with natural science is a rather poor joke.”²⁴

Loisy was not chiefly to blame for his break with his superiors coming when it did. There had been a lack of accord between the two allied institutions — the Catholic Institute, committed to a mild and circumspect, but in so far genuine, Liberalism, and St. Sulpice, the bulwark of Ultramontanism, upheld by the aged and reactionary Cardinal Richard, archbishop of Paris. On the death of Renan in 1892, M. d’Hulst published in the *Correspondant* an article in which he made the invidious suggestion that if St. Sulpice years before had given Renan the kind of enlightenment now to be obtained, for example, at the Catholic Institute, his great powers need never have been lost to the Church. The well-meaning but imperfectly trained rector of the Catholic Institute appears to have felt vaguely that the time had come for doing something toward bringing the mind of

²⁴ *Choses Passées*, p. 110. Cf. Houtin, *La Question Biblique chez les Catholiques de France au XIX^e Siècle*, and *La Question Biblique au XX^e Siècle*.

Catholicism more into touch with the living thought of the age. He began, that is, to be haunted by the same dream that had long been in the mind of his young professor of Biblical introduction. It was not to him, however, that the latter turned for help in the *impasse* toward which he felt himself drifting, but to his former patron at Châlons, Mgr. Meignan, then archbishop of Tours and on the point of being made a cardinal.²⁵ To him Loisy wrote, appealing for a public token of approval and support. The wise old man—a fine type of the higher French clergy, with no less goodness of heart than keenness of mind—knew better than to commit himself on paper in so delicate a matter; but he invited his former *protégé*, whom he seems to have sincerely liked, to an interview, which was held on a late October morning in 1892, at an old Paris inn in the Latin Quarter. A remarkable conversation it was. The archbishop, who smoked cigarettes as he talked, was almost, if not quite, as conversant with the state of critical learning as his companion. On that score, they frankly stood together. But when it came to publishing critical results, the would-be cardinal bluntly declared that the tolerance of the Jesuits set rigid limits to what Catholic scholars could safely avow, and their power and vindictiveness were to be feared. He instanced the example of the Oratorian, Richard Simon, crushed by Bossuet, saying, “Our theologians are ferocious; they put us on the Index for nothing.” A free criticism, he held, never had existed and never could exist in the Roman Catholic Church, and he warned Loisy that even those who thought in their hearts as he did would not uphold him in a crisis. All this was shown in the sequel to be true. They must be advocates, sincere advocates, he urged repeatedly, of tradition. Nothing else would serve.²⁶

²⁵ On Cardinal Meignan, cf. Georges Weill, *Histoire du Catholicisme libéral en France, 1828–1908*, pp. 211 f., 243 ff.

²⁶ *Choses Passées*, pp. 114 ff.

From the point of view of worldly policy, this was sound advice; and if Loisy had been the time-server that most of his liberal friends and colleagues showed themselves to be—anxious above all for preferment and the rewards of an ecclesiastical career—he would have gone back to his textual criticism and Assyriology, leaving others to burn their fingers on more dangerous topics. Writing, years afterwards, to one of his associates who had gained some of the kingdoms of this world—becoming at last, by an unfaltering compliance with the papal tactics of repression, rector of the Catholic Institute in Paris—he sketched the lines on which his own life might have moved serenely to the end:

“If I had been willing to imprison myself in Orientalism, I should still be teaching Hebrew and Assyriology under you; as rector of the Catholic Institute, you would sing my praises in your annual reports to the assembly of bishops; I should be cited as an example of the harmony between science and faith, precisely because I had occupied myself only with science and had never spoken of faith. I should probably be an honorary canon of Notre Dame. And that is how I missed being happy in this world!”²⁷

That was not to be the kind of obscure, untroubled happiness appointed for Alfred Loisy. It was, however, no false step on his own part, but over-eagerness of the superficial and at bottom timorous M. d’Hulst to be a leader of Catholic thought that brought on the catastrophe. Flattered by the acclaim that had greeted his article on Renan, and sincerely concerned to protect his professor of Biblical introduction, the rector launched a second article in the *Correspondant*, this time on a more perilous theme—the Biblical question. It was the production of a tactician, not of a scholar. Under the caption of the *école large*, which he was pleased to contrast with the traditional and the mediating schools—the last being the position he assumed for himself—

²⁷ Loisy, *Quelques Lettres*, p. 221.

the Rector outlined what was taken at Rome and elsewhere to be an authoritative statement of Loisy's principles. The *école large*, as a matter of fact, never existed, except as a diplomatic fiction. The writer had no grasp of exact scientific method and was incapable of comprehending Loisy's guiding conception of the complete historical relativity of doctrine. The plump admission, in behalf of the mythical *école large*, of errors in the Bible shocked the Ultramontane theologians, while the counter-claim that, notwithstanding acknowledged mistakes in science and history, the *école large* held the Bible to be inerrant in faith and morals, offered no adequate compensation. The sensation was great. After a show of resistance, M. d'Hulst, thoroughly alarmed for his own future and that of the Institute, bent before the storm. A visit to Rome convinced him that no headway was to be made on the line he had chosen, and he was persuaded that his young professor — whom he had meanwhile done nothing to disentangle from the compromising connection in which he had placed him — would better be relieved of his chair of Biblical introduction. This was accordingly done, and Loisy submitted to go back to his Hebrew and Assyriology, on the condition that his scientific results in exegesis should continue to be published. The compromise was not destined to last long.²⁸

In the closing lecture of his course, in June, Loisy felt himself entitled, in self-justification, to define his actual position on the Biblical question and on inspiration. His lecture, when published in his review the following November (1893), a fortnight before the annual meeting of the episcopal protectors of the Catholic Institute, created a scandal. The permanent ac-

²⁸ If less than full justice is here done, following Loisy's own narration, to the excellent M. d'Hulst, reference may be made to his official biography, *Vie de Mgr. d'Hulst*, 2 vols., Paris, 1914, by Mgr. Alfred Baudrillart, Rector of the Catholic Institute in Paris, the recipient of the letter cited above, p. 51.

quisitions of an unfettered criticism were summed up in five propositions. The first denied the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. The second controverted the historical accuracy of the opening chapters of Genesis. The third declared that the Biblical books should be subject to the same processes of interpretation as other writings. The fourth established a real progress of doctrine, in all its branches, within the Bible itself. The fifth asserted that, as regards natural science, the Scriptures do not rise above the opinions of the time in which the various books were composed. These elementary statements of critical certainties seemed to the traditionally-minded Cardinal Richard to be damnable heresies of the most pernicious kind. He had never encountered the like. He lost no time in bringing the case before the assembly of bishops in November, and they voted, with only four protesting voices, to dismiss Loisy from the post where he had labored so abundantly, though not without serious searchings of conscience, for twelve fruitful, if troubled, years. It was a heavy blow. He naturally felt himself to be on the point of exclusion from the Church, and long afterwards he seems to have wished that the authorities might have signified to him then that his tendencies were those of a lay scholar, and given him back the freedom he had pledged to the Church that could only spurn his talents.²⁹

III

Man proposes, but God more wisely disposes. The next stage in the career of this much-buffed Ulysses was an unlooked-for haven of rest, where for five pregnant years he found external peace, a not uncongenial task, and abundant incitement to continue the researches into Biblical and Christian origins, for which the work

²⁹ *Choses Passées*, p. 365. Cf. below, p. 62.

already done had laid so solid and durable a foundation. Cardinal Richard, who was not unkindly disposed toward him personally — although their total dissimilarity of outlook made their few interviews very distressing to Loisy — appointed him, in September, 1894, chaplain to a convent of Dominican nuns at Neuilly. His task there was to give daily instruction in the catechism to young girls of secondary grade. Nothing could have seemed more innocuous, and so the Cardinal doubtless felicitated himself. But nothing could have been more nicely calculated to set the future "Modernist" forward on his way. He had an ample margin of free time for his chosen studies, which he employed to the fullest advantage. His whole mind was now concentrated on the problem of adapting the teachings of Catholicism to contemporary thought.

In 1893, he had made the acquaintance of Baron Friedrich von Hügel, and at his suggestion had taken up the study of Newman, especially the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Those were significant years in the world of Protestant theology. Not long before, Harnack had published his great *History of Dogma*. In 1894, appeared Wellhausen's *History of Israel and Judah*, while the year 1897 was marked by the publication of Auguste Sabatier's *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion*, Heinrich Holtzmann's *New Testament Theology*, and Albert Réville's *Jesus of Nazareth*. These great works Loisy also studied and meditated, while as a reviewer for the *Revue Critique* he was in the habit of receiving current publications on the history and philosophy of religion, the history of dogma and church history. His activity as a reviewer has always been phenomenal. In 1896, he established, with the aid of friends, the *Revue d'Histoire et de Littérature religieuses*, which continued with a short break until August, 1914. While at Neuilly, he was laying the

foundation for the elaborate commentaries on the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics, which appeared in 1903 and 1908 respectively. But his most absorbing task in this safe retreat was the writing of a long historical and philosophical apology for Catholicism, in contrast with the Protestant masterpieces just named, and largely in obedience to the impulse to demonstrate to himself that he could still remain a Catholic. Personally unable to accept literally any single article of the creed — unless it were that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate — he was yet sincerely devoted to the Catholic Church, which he believed might have a future as glorious as her past, if she could only learn to use the language of living men. A deep distress was afflicting the inner life of the Church and it was not only in relation to Biblical questions that there was need of rejuvenation. Preparing his daily lessons in the catechism for his young hearers with these preoccupations in mind, Loisy devoted himself to the composition of a book in which he unfolded his conception of a reformed Catholicism.³⁰ From this large work, in twelve chapters, of which he gives a most suggestive outline in *Choses Passées*, were drawn parts of the famous “little orange-colored books,”³¹ to the first of which we shall soon come in describing his decisive conflict with the Papacy.

A severe illness, which carried him within a handbreadth of death itself, led in the fall of 1899 to his resignation of the appointment at Neuilly. As his strength came back, he continued the publication — part of the time over pseudonyms, to throw inquisitors off the track — of articles dealing with such themes as the origin of the New Testament, Catholic opinions on the Pentateuch, and the papal brief of September, 1899, on the studies of the French clergy. An exceptionally frank discussion of Biblical questions at the congress of Catholic

³⁰ *Choses Passées*, p. 170.

³¹ Paul Sabatier, *Modernism*, Introd. p. 7.

scholars in Freiburg, in 1897, in which Loisy's friend Baron von Hügel took a leading part, had quickened his hopes, notwithstanding the discouragement that had resulted from the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* in 1893. His endeavor was to claim a place for free and fearless criticism within the Catholic system, largely as a means of meeting Protestant contentions, which he felt — as he sought to demonstrate in *L'Évangile et L'Église* — to be fallacious. If his dismissal from the Catholic Institute might be considered merely a stroke of policy, the authorities showed themselves to be on the alert by an official censure which he now received. The first of a series of articles in the *Revue du clergé français*, on the religion of Israel,³² was disapproved, and the continuation of the series forbidden, by Cardinal Richard, proving how little the hierarchy was yet prepared for any advance in this direction. Loisy now felt, even more than when he had been expelled from the Catholic Institute, that he was being singled out as a heretic and as a spreader of heresy. In order not to sacrifice his independence, he declined to be longer the recipient of a small pension, which had been granted him during his illness from a fund for infirm priests.

At this juncture, as later at a more important moment, help came to him unexpectedly from the lay element in French society. Through M. Paul Desjardins, with friendly aid from M. Albert Réville, he was appointed lecturer in the section of the science of religion at the *École pratique des Hautes Études*, and assistant in the preparation of the *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum*, and in December, 1900, he began a series of public lectures on the Babylonian myths and the first chapters of Genesis.³³ On the death of Auguste Sabatier in the spring of 1901, Loisy hoped to succeed him in the chair

³² *La Religion d'Israel*, 2d edition, 1903. Eng. tr. by Arthur Galton, *The Religion of Israel*, Fisher Unwin, London, 1910.

³³ *Les Mythes Babyloniens et les premiers chapitres de la Genèse*, 1901.

of early Christian literature, but the fact that he still wore the habit of a priest stood in the way. In the year 1901-02, his lectures were on the criticism of the Gospels, in 1902-03 on the Galilean, and in 1903-04 on the Jerusalem ministry, thus continuing the work that was to issue in *Les Évangiles Synoptiques*. Loisy believes that Cardinal Richard was from this time determined to suppress all overt utterance and publication on his part, but did not clearly see his way to do it. There was much consultation of the authorities behind the scenes though no action, and Loisy tried through Cardinal Mathieu to make his position understood in high Roman circles. He felt, beneath the *régime* of rigid repression, a growing intellectual anarchy among the Catholic clergy. Many besides himself were infected with the new ideas, some of them his own pupils, and his responsibility for these kindred spirits worked strongly to keep him within the Catholic fold, long after his own conviction and convenience would have impelled him to withdraw.

Two otherwise unconnected events came together to mark the end of the year 1902 — Loisy's presentation as a candidate for the bishopric of Monaco by Prince Albert, who was out of favor with Rome, and whose three candidates were summarily rejected; and the publication of his most noted volume, *L'Évangile et l'Église*, the first of the "little orange-colored books," together with a foretaste of his synoptic commentary in *Études Évangéliques*. The latter work was perhaps too technical in character to attract wide attention, but the former marked a date, not only in its author's personal career but in the progress of Catholic Modernism.

In form, a reply to Harnack's *Wesen des Christentums* (1900), of which a French translation appeared early in 1902 and received warm approval in Catholic as well as in Protestant circles, in fact *L'Évangile et l'Église* was a dis-

creet yet frank plea for the more progressive Catholicism of which its author felt called to stand forth as sponsor. The book has thus two aspects, of nearly equal significance. The more obvious is the orderly and explicit refutation of Professor Harnack. His "essence" appeared to Loisy to be that of Liberal Protestantism, rather than of Christianity as the scientific historian must conceive it; a dogmatic construction, therefore, resting on an inadequate understanding and an imperfect analysis of the Christian origins. As a living faith, carried on by actual men in the bosom of existing society, Christianity must needs have a body as well as a soul. It cannot be summed up in a formula so simple as, inward trust in the loving Father revealed by Jesus. Its essence, so far as the term can be made to apply, must be found in its total life, advancing with constant change and ever-new formulation down the centuries, while still loyal to the initial impulse given it by the Founder. "Why must we consider the essence of the tree as contained in a particle of the germ from which it sprang, and why may it not be as truly and more completely realized in the tree than in the seed?" he pertinently asks. "Professor Harnack," he adds, "does not conceive of Christianity as a germ that has developed, at first potentially and only later really a plant, identical with itself from the beginning of its evolution to the stage it has now reached, and from root to topmost branch; but as a ripe, or rather damaged, fruit, which must be peeled to reach the untainted kernel. And Professor Harnack peels so industriously that it is a question whether in the end he has anything left."³⁴ Attractive as Harnack's thesis is, and useful as has been on the whole its influence as an antidote to the older

³⁴ *L'Évangile et l'Église*, 4th edition, pp. xxvi, xxix. The English translation, by Christopher Home, *The Gospel and the Church*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904, is marred by the translator's eccentricity in referring to Professor Harnack throughout as "Herr" Harnack.

Protestant dogmatics, still an open-minded reader can scarcely set his book and Loisy's side by side without feeling that the latter proves himself to be the more penetrating critic of the Gospels and the sounder historian of early Christianity. He is successful in showing that the Roman Catholic Church as a doctrine, as a life, as an organization, and as a worship—widely as it has departed in externals and at times in spirit from the gospel of Jesus—has yet held true to the “notes,” as Newman would say, of primitive Christianity. It is an impressive demonstration, to which Protestant students would do well to pay more heed. This criticism of Liberal Protestantism—represented not only by Harnack, but also by Auguste Sabatier—as too subjective, abstract, and out of touch with historical religion, which has always been a communal rather than an individual affair, seemed to Loisy later to be the most valuable part of his work.

IV

When we consider *L'Évangile et l'Église* in its second aspect, as a plea for a new and progressive Catholicism, able and willing to admit to the full the results of a criticism of the Old and New Testaments as radical as Loisy's, and prepared, moreover, to concede the complete relativity of its own doctrines to the times and circumstances of their origin, we are confronted by an irrepressible conflict which could hardly issue otherwise than in the excommunication of the intrepid scholar. “Admitting,” as he says, “that the tradition is sacred and immutable, any word derogatory to the tradition is reprehensible.” In Tyrrell's terms, it was mediævalism pitted against modernism. Whatever Loisy might say in defense of Roman Catholicism as the legitimate product of a long historical evolution, by the end of the nineteenth century it had become in government

and in doctrine a rigid absolutism. The last faint stirrings of national independence, in Gallicanism, had been effectually suppressed, and Ultramontanism was everywhere triumphant. After the promulgation of papal infallibility in 1870, Döllinger and the Old Catholics were scarcely able to make a ripple in the general current of Catholic life, which flowed on as if unconscious of any inner conflict. The vigorous effort of Lord Acton in England to impart an intellectual stimulus to Catholicism, met with a discouraging response. "It is incontestable," writes an authority, referring to the situation in France, "that Catholics, on the average, have not in the least assimilated the intellectual movement of the last four centuries, although a small *élite* of Catholics is at the forefront of the movement."³⁵

After the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), on the study of Holy Scripture—which, Loisy tells us, did not expressly condemn the idea of a truly critical and historical exegesis because its existence was then not even suspected at Rome³⁶—he had taken the advice of a friend in the priesthood and written the Pope a letter of filial submission. Like his attitude in general during those earlier years, his letter was scarcely ingenuous in its attitude toward the Roman authority. This was perhaps inevitable, yet it brings out vividly the ineradicable weakness of the Modernist position. One cannot have his cake and eat it too. Loisy frankly stated his critical principles, but at the same time avowed his wish to remain an obedient son of the Church. So long as he held to this equivocation, he was neither happy nor free, nor had he even power to aid those who thought and suffered with him. Largely for their sakes he clung

³⁵ A Catholic professor, quoted by Weill, *op. cit.* p. 257. Schnitzer, *op. cit.*, also gives much evidence, especially as regards German Catholicism.

³⁶ Choses Passées, p. 153. Houtin is doubtless right in saying that the Encyclical was directed mainly against Loisy's position. *Histoire du modernisme catholique* p. 18.

to it until it was made no longer a tenable position within the pale of the Church.

"Called, four years ago, to occupy the chair of Biblical exegesis in the faculty of theology at Paris," thus he wrote to Leo XIII in 1893, "I have wished to pursue in my writings the accord between faith and science in the field of Scripture. . . . In questions of history, I have sought to resolve, by an attentive scrutiny of the means employed by the sacred writers and of the end which they had in view, the contradictions which seem to exist among them. It appeared to me necessary, in response to the needs of the present time, to make a prudent application of the critical method, so far as might be legitimate, to the study of Holy Scripture, and thus to meet the adversaries of the Bible with their own weapons."

After alluding to his dismissal from the Catholic Institute — which the Pope and his advisers had thought a trifle abrupt — he concludes:

"It is a severe trial for a priest whose life has long been devoted to Biblical studies to find himself thus held up to general reprobation as a disseminator of dangerous opinions, in advance of any judgment by the Apostolic See. But I now find much consolation in attesting to the Vicar of Jesus Christ, *in all simplicity of soul*, my most entire submission to the doctrine promulgated in the Encyclical on the Study of Holy Scripture. The objections which the enemies of the Church already raise against *this admirable document* have suggested the idea of a memorial, *addressed in lowly homage to Your Holiness*, to witness to my perfect submission to the instructions of the Holy See, to the good-will with which I have hitherto served the Church, and to my hope of further service in conformity to all the directions of the magnanimous Pontiff, Leo XIII."³⁷

This over-unctuous epistle is probably best explained by the hope of the writer, shared with reason by many others, that Leo XIII was really on the side of progress. Appended to it was a longer statement in which, "with an audacity equalled only by my can-

³⁷ Choses Passées, p. 390; the italics are mine.

dor," as Loisy now declares, he more fully explained his critical procedure. The Pope read both documents and returned word by Cardinal Rampolla that, while appreciative of the expressions of fidelity to the Holy See, he advised the writer, "owing to circumstances and in his own interest," to apply his talents to another kind of studies. Loisy thus received the plainest of hints from the highest authority in the Church. It was his own responsibility if he did not choose to take it, but persisted in his reforming efforts until another pontiff, of a different calibre and more direct methods, came upon the scene.

Mention was made earlier of the suppression by Cardinal Richard of the first of a series of articles on the religion of Israel. In the spring of 1901, Loisy was denounced before the Holy Inquisition,³⁸ but he was still writing as a scholar for scholars and nothing came of it. *L'Évangile et l'Église*, which was his first appeal to a wider public, gave the signal for a storm of criticism and abuse in the Catholic press. Loisy intimates that personal enemies, who are perhaps to be sought among his former associates at the Catholic Institute, egged on his persecutors.³⁹ He was made to appear as a deliberate troubler of the faith of simple Catholics. He hints at a persistent campaign of calumny, motivated by the bitter hatred of some one in a place of influence. Cardinal Richard at once took official action. On January 17, 1903, he issued an ordinance forbidding the reading of the book by the priests or faithful of his diocese, for the reason that it had appeared without the usual *imprimatur*, and was "of a nature gravely to disturb the faith of believers in the fundamental dogmas of the Catholic teaching."⁴⁰ Like action was taken by the titular heads of a number of other French dioceses. Loisy deemed it prudent not to resist this prohibition,

³⁸ Choses Passées, p. 227.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 243.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 249.

and held up the second edition of his book, already in the press.

"My intention," he writes, "was to go no farther in the way of concessions. Just as I had kept silent before the condemnation in 1900 of the articles of 'Firmin' [one of his pseudonyms], I meant to say nothing before the censure placed upon *L'Évangile et l'Église*. This was the best posture I could assume, and the most sincere, because within myself I had no real respect for the archiepiscopal sentence, and I could not make a 'submission' except by adding reserves that would render it unmeaning or equivocal."⁴¹

Nevertheless, on hearing from his friend, Archbishop Mignot of Albi that Leo XIII expected his formal adherence to Cardinal Richard's decree, he wrote the Cardinal a letter in which occurs the following sentence:

"It goes without saying that I condemn and reprove all the errors that have been deduced from my book by those who place themselves, in interpreting it, at a point of view wholly different from that which I necessarily occupied in composing it."

The equivocation here leaps to the light, and naturally his subtle meaning was totally misconstrued. Loisy regrets having taken this step. In the hope of clearing himself, he wrote again, this time telling the Cardinal:

"I reserve, certainly, my personal opinion on all that has occurred in connection with this work of history in which it pleases some to hunt for errors in theology."⁴²

This is the last trace we can find of the dubious influence over him of Duchesne's sophistical dualism. At last comes the sincere note of personal revolt. It was time. The situation was inherently false, and needed clearing up. Between papal Rome and the unfettered reason no truce can be made, at least until Rome lays aside its pretense to sovereign infallibility and adopts a radically different conception of the seat of authority

⁴¹ Choses Passées, p. 251. The difference in tone between this and the letter of ten years before, already quoted, is noteworthy.

⁴² Ibid. p. 254.

in religion. Of Loisy's initial good faith and entire loyalty in striving for a gradual lowering of the papal claims, there can be no question. But he was now at the parting of the ways. Either Rome must bend, or he must end his career as a priest of the Catholic Church.

Rome was not preparing to bend. As long as the politic and crafty Leo XIII had been at the helm, Cardinal Richard and others might rush to the Vatican and clamor eagerly for lightening the barque of Peter by throwing overboard the Jonah who was troubling its peace; still nothing was done. But in July, 1903, Leo XIII passed to his reward, and a month later Pius X reigned in his stead. The change was almost instantly felt. Now Cardinal Richard had his chance, and he hastened to use it. One of the last acts of the old Pope had been to refuse to sanction the placing of *Etudes Evangeliques* on the Index. The new Pope was told that the younger clergy were losing respect for tradition, and disdaining the scholastic system and the two great councils it had inspired, that of Trent and that of the Vatican, and that Loisy was largely to blame for this.⁴³ Meanwhile, Loisy's own spirit was growing firmer and more resolute. His extended commentary on the Fourth Gospel was finished, and its printing had begun.

"In it," he says, "I formulate conclusions unheard of among Catholic exegetes — the unauthenticity of the book, which cannot be attributed to the apostle John; the symbolical and factitious character of the narratives, in accord with the theology of the discourses, which do not reflect the teaching of Jesus; and that the Fourth Gospel is a product of Christian faith, not a history of Christ himself." ⁴⁴

At the same time, he decided to issue an explanation and defense of *L'Évangile et l'Église*, with replies to some of his critics. This was the second of the "little

⁴³ Choses Passées, p. 230.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 258.

orange-colored books"—*Autour d'un petit Livre* (1903). Following an extended introduction, the volume consists of seven letters, in part to friends by way of explanation, and in part to opponents by way of rebuttal. The subjects of the letters are—(1) the origin and object of the "little book" (*L'Évangile et l'Église*), (2) the Biblical question, (3) the criticism of the Gospels, and especially of John, (4) the divinity of Christ, (5) the foundation and authority of the Church, (6) the origin and authority of dogmas, and (7) the institution of sacraments. The recipients of these epistles are described in the book as first issued by title only—as, "To a Cardinal," "To the Superior of a Seminary"—but in *Choses Passées* their names are given without reserve.

Autour d'un petit Livre only deepened the offense given to the Ultramontane circle by *L'Évangile et l'Église*. The first of these little books had been a defense of progressive Catholicism against Protestant subjectivism and individualism; the second was an impassioned defense of the author and his critical freedom against Catholic scholasticism and excess of traditionalism. It is a magnificent outburst of consciously righteous wrath against entrenched scholastic dulness and haughty obscurantism in the Church of his birthright. More incisive and brilliant, more solid and convincing polemical writing than these ringing chapters cannot be found, so far as I know, in the long record of theological "wars of the Lord." They vibrate with personal emotion, showing not only the scholar, but also the man. Nowhere has Loisy better displayed the resources of his immense learning, the strength and firmness of his historical method, the trenchancy of his critical intelligence, and withal the play of his biting wit and lament humor. Nothing but the fact that mankind is solicitous for anything and everything except searching out the truth about its own gravest concerns, and that

the debate was in a region remote from the external passions of the moment, kept this from being a shot heard around the world. But the fortunate few who have had the intellectual, yes, the spiritual, joy of reading it, must feel that a new Erasmus is here, equal in culture and more than equal in courage to the gentle dreamer of Rotterdam. "After all, it does move!" — this is the challenge that he seems to hurl in the name of modern scholarship at the sealed doors of the Vatican. After all, modernism, progress, reliance on reason, is the spirit of the age in which we live. A Loisy may be excommunicated, as a Galileo was silenced; but that settles nothing. The world goes its way, and an institution — even if it be as ancient and august as the Roman Catholic Church — which refuses to move with it, is left behind. However, the old Church is wiser than any one pope or any single generation of her doctors, and the story of Catholic Modernism is not yet a closed book.

"*L'Évangile et l'Église* was written to show how the Catholic principle, in virtue of its inexhaustible fecundity, is able to adapt itself to every form of human progress. But the adaptation in the past has never been made without effort; it will be the same in the future." ⁴⁵

That effort cannot be said to have more than begun; but unless Catholicism is to belie its past, its hour and Loisy's full justification will yet come.

V

What Loisy hoped and desired of the Roman Catholic Church was nothing excessive or unreasonable.

"There is a sort of latent incompatibility," he wrote in his sixth letter, "which speedily becomes conscious in a great many individuals, between the general knowledge of the world and man that is acquired today in the most ordinary education, and that which controls, or rather penetrates, the Catholic doctrine. Any substantial change in that doctrine could not be realized and is

⁴⁵ Autour, p. xxxvi.

not required; what is demanded is above all a change in spirit and attitude toward the intellectual movement of our time.”⁴⁶

As a historian he realized that no sudden revolution in the formulas of the Church could take place. Inclined himself toward a theory of critical symbolism in religious belief,⁴⁷ he seems to have been willing to leave the Church in possession of her traditional symbols, provided only a new and larger interpretation of the formulas might be permitted where they come into conflict with fact.⁴⁸ But the official Church was not receptive to such counsel, and in giving it, Loisy was at last determined to suffer excommunication rather than sacrifice further his freedom of conscience as critic and as historian.

Autour d'un petit Livre and *Le Quatrième Évangile* had not been published a month when Cardinal Richard was in Rome, bent on securing their author's condemnation by the Holy Office. In December, 1903, five of his books—*La Religion d'Israel*, *Études Évangéliques*, *L'Évangile et l'Église*, *Autour d'un petit Livre*, and *Le Quatrième Évangile*—were placed on the Index of prohibited books. Loisy made up his mind to receive this decree with respect, and to tender his formal submission, as he had done after the censure of *L'Évangile et l'Église*. The essential statements in his reply to the notification by Mgr. Merry del Val, the Cardinal Secretary of State, are these:

“I receive with respect the judgment of the Sacred Congregations, and myself condemn in my own writings whatever in them

⁴⁶ *Choses Passées*, p. 209 f.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 263. His approximation here to Auguste Sabatier is to be noted in view of his frank opposition to him as a historian of early Christianity, referred to above.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 269. How long he could have been satisfied with so patent a compromise cannot be told. As an expedient, it appears to work well in the Anglican and some other churches; but the condition there is one of unstable equilibrium. Cf. Harnack's penetrating remarks in *What is Christianity?* Eng. tr., by T. B. Saunders, Williams and Norgate, 1901, p. 175.

is reprehensible. . . . I must nevertheless add that my adherence to the sentence of the Sacred Congregations is purely disciplinary in character. I reserve the right of my conscience, and do not wish to be understood, in bowing before the judgment rendered by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, as abandoning or retracting the opinions put forth in my quality as historian or as critical interpreter."⁴⁹

There was no chance of this language meeting with sympathy or understanding from the Roman curia. In reply, Merry del Val sent to Cardinal Richard a letter which Loisy describes as "extremely violent." It was read to him but never put into his hands. It demanded immediate retraction, without reserve, of the five condemned volumes and their contents on pain of a further proceeding of the Holy Office *ad ulteriora*. This of course was the expected threat of excommunication. A second letter to the Cardinal Secretary of State, couched in the same general terms as the first, only brought another insistent demand for an unqualified retraction. Loisy seems to have felt it his duty to stay in the Church as long as he could, or at least to do nothing himself to provoke the final rupture,⁵⁰ although he felt keenly the absurdity of being required to retract the entire contents of his books, as though all in them alike were untrue. Excommunication now appeared to be imminent. Loisy even prepared the letter that would be expected of him on the publication of the decree. He recognized that his place could only be outside of the Catholic Church as it was then inspired and directed. Suddenly, however, affairs took a new turn, and his expulsion was indefinitely postponed.

What happened was a sudden breakdown, under the intense and prolonged strain, of his physical and nervous forces. He came to shrink from the notoriety connected with excommunication, to dread lest it should turn him aside from his precious work of writing and teaching.

⁴⁹ Choses Passées, p. 277.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 284.

Already a curious and unwelcome throng was crowding the lecture-room at the *École pratique des Hautes Études*, where his exposition of the Synoptic Gospels was steadily progressing week by week. Also he dreaded the possible effect of his exclusion on the many who had followed, encouraged, sustained, or protected him in the Church. Above all, his soul was sadly weary of strife. It was, he suggests, a crisis of neurasthenia.⁵¹ He took an impulsive resolve: to let the excommunication come, and then after sentence was passed to write to the Pope, protesting the uprightness of his intentions, declaring that he could not honestly have refrained from making the reservations he did in his two letters to the Cardinal Secretary of State, and witnessing to his good-will for the pacification of spirits by abandoning the instruction he was giving in Paris. After that, His Holiness could judge whether or not to maintain the censure brought against him.⁵²

On the advice of two friends, a priest and a layman, he decided to change this plan in one important respect: to write to the Pope before, instead of waiting until after, the sentence of excommunication was decreed. This meant only to prolong the agony. But he was not in a condition to decide calmly. His letter to Pius X began with an appeal to the Pope's goodness of heart. It expressed the writer's wish to live and die in the communion of the Catholic Church, and not to contribute to the ruin of the faith in France. Asserting that it was not in his power to destroy in himself the results of his labors, he yet submitted as much as lay in his control to the judgment brought against his writings by the Congregation of the Index. As a token of his good-will and for the pacification of spirits, he was ready to abandon his teaching and suspend the scientific publications he had in preparation.⁵³ Early in March,

⁵¹ *Choses Passées*, p. 307.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 290.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 292.

a rumor of his excommunication was printed in the newspapers, and Loisy believes the decree was actually prepared. Then came the most painful of all his encounters with Cardinal Richard. Through him the Pope sent word that the letter addressed to his heart had not proceeded from the heart. The promise to abandon teaching had been acceptable, but had been spoiled by the words, "It is not in my power to destroy in myself the results of my labors." The letter to the Cardinal ended:

"Assuredly, he is not asked to write no more, but to write in defense of the tradition, conformably to the words of St. Remy to Clovis: 'Adore what you once burned, and burn what you once adored.'"

At this, Loisy says, something gave way within him. He had yet other experiences to undergo to make him wish to be no longer a Catholic, but this heartless rejection by the Head of the Church was the decisive one. By a strange revulsion of feeling, however, after a tumultuous debate with the venerable Archbishop of Paris, on the same day Loisy sent him the following note:

"*Monsignor* —

I declare to Your Eminence that, in a spirit of obedience toward the Holy See, I condemn the errors which the Holy Office has condemned in my writings."⁵⁴

This was superfluous, if not actually misleading; and afterwards he would gladly have recalled it. He proceeded, however, to resign his chair at the *École pratique des Hautes Études*, and his place as assistant in the *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum*, left Paris, and went to live in a small cottage loaned to him by his friend, the historian, Francis Thureau-Dangin, in the village of Garnay. There he hoped to end his days in peace. He had just passed his forty-seventh birthday,

⁵⁴ Choses Passées, p. 299.

but he seemed to others and to himself an old and broken man.

The "laborious Odyssey" of his Catholic career was to last four years longer; yet not without compensations. The first of these years was occupied in the composition of the magisterial Introduction to his *Évangiles Synoptiques*. Nearly two years more were spent on the revision of the Commentary and the Introduction, while the fourth—from January, 1907, to January, 1908—was consumed in seeing the great work of eighteen hundred octavo pages through the press. All but the last few months of this quiet and fruitful interval were spent in what Loisy calls his "hermitage" at Garnay, the toil of writing and proof-reading being varied by care of his tiny garden and his few fowls. Some sections of the forthcoming commentary were published in the form of review-articles, and he continued his activity as a book-reviewer. It is evident that he had grounds for not feeling himself bound by his promise to the Pope to suspend his scientific publications. The Vatican, incensed by an article on John the Baptist's message to Jesus, retaliated by refusing to reissue a permission which had been granted him, owing to his infirm health, to say mass in his room. Thus on the first of November, 1906, he ceased after twenty-seven years to perform this daily service of the Catholic priesthood. During the same month he suffered from severe hemorrhages, and became so ill that he took measures to ensure the publication of *Les Évangiles Synoptiques* in the event of his death. In April, 1907, he removed from Garnay to live with his sister at Ceffonds, having received medical advice that he would be better for living less alone.

That was the period of the mighty struggle of Church and State in France, which ended—chiefly owing to the arrogant and unbending attitude of Pius X and

Merry del Val—in the abrogation of the Concordat and in complete disestablishment.⁵⁵ Coincident with this, and as a further endeavor of the Vatican to “restore all things in Christ,” came the campaign of increasing severity against Modernism. This part of Loisy’s career can best be followed in the correspondence which he published in *Quelques Lettres* (1908), extracts from which are given in the later pages of *Choses Passées*. But we must hasten to the long-foreseen conclusion.

In July, 1907, appeared the expected syllabus of Modernist errors, the decree *Lamentabili sane exitu*, and in September the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis*, “against the errors of the Modernists.” The only comment on these papal pronouncements calling for mention here is that which Loisy made to admiration in *Simplex Réflexions sur le Décret du Saint-Office, Lamentabili sane exitu, et sur l’Encyclique, Pascendi dominici gregis* (1908). In the first half of this volume, he shows that practically all of the sixty-five condemned propositions of the syllabus were taken from his two books, *L’Évangile et l’Église* and *Autour d’un petit Livre*, in a large proportion of cases, however, distorted to suit the systematizing passion of his Roman censors. The second half is given up to a demonstration of the artificiality and injustice of the procedure of lumping together in one sweeping condemnation the extremely various and unconnected efforts of philosophy, theology, criticism, history, apologetics, and practical social reform which the official inquisitors saw fit to group together under the rubric of Modernism. Less interesting, because more scholastic in tone, and less personally impassioned, than *Autour, Simplex Réflexions* is none the less a document of the first importance for the history of Modernism, and a damaging indictment of the false logic, critical and

⁵⁵ The story is elaborately told, including the astonishing episode of the Dreyfus Affair, by A. Debidour, *L’Église Catholique et l’État en France, 1870–1906*, tome II; an able work, of strong anti-clerical bias.

historical incompetence, and essential superficiality of the reigning Catholic theologians of the beginning of the twentieth century.

The thread was now wearing painfully thin, and the sword of excommunication could not much longer hang over him. There were final vain efforts by Loisy's friends in the Church to persuade him to conform. The Pope even sent a last solemn warning—"in order, if possible, to save a soul."⁵⁶ The sentence of excommunication (March 7, 1908) was published to the world two months after the appearance of *Les Évangiles Synoptiques*, the two events apparently not being connected, and without its victim being personally notified. It was after all a relief. A few months later, Loisy had the honor of election to a chair in the *Collège de France*, made sacred to him by his early master, Renan. His Catholic career was ended. But its influence upon the Church that so laboriously made him a heresiarch⁵⁷ is still to be reckoned with, and can hardly fail of its ultimate, transforming effect.

⁵⁶ Choses Passées, p. 364.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Avant-propos.